

The Preservation of Pleasant Hill

In August 1805, missionaries from the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (commonly known as The Shakers) found three Kentuckians who were willing to listen to their testimony. These three men were the first Shaker converts in Kentucky. In a short time, Believers began moving to a farm on the banks of Shawnee Run. In 1807 they purchased a nearby hilltop with beautiful vistas and began constructing a permanent village they named Pleasant Hill.

The Pleasant Hill Shakers were simple, hardworking farmers who were accustomed to overcoming hardships by using strong will, ingenuity, and determination. Their self-sufficiency served them well as they established a utopia in what was then wilderness.

Over a 105-year span, Pleasant Hill's Shakers constructed a total of 270 structures, 33 of which remain today. By 1910, the Shakers had closed their doors at Pleasant Hill as an active religious society. Their last land holdings were deeded to a local merchant with the agreement that he would care for them until their death. Sister Mary Settles, the last Shaker at Pleasant Hill, died in 1923. Shortly after Sister Mary's death, the land, buildings, and all Shaker possessions were auctioned. The once thriving utopian society became just another small country town called "Shakertown" until restoration began in 1961. For the next 37 years, the buildings changed hands many times, some disappeared, and others fell into varying states of decay and disuse. Due to the excellence in Shaker craftsmanship, the larger structures remained sound.

Buildings took on new functions over the years. The Trustees' Office was operated as a restaurant. The 1820 Meeting House became the home of the Shakertown Baptist Church. The Carpenter's Shop served the

community as a general store and the Farm Deacon's Shop was a gas station. Many of the smaller workshop buildings were used as tenant houses, with a few Victorian porches obscuring the simplicity of the Shaker lines. The Centre Family Dwelling was leased by Goodwill Industries, although never completely used.

A groundswell of interest in saving these historic structures resulted in the formation of an organization to acquire and restore them in 1961. That year, Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, Inc., was formed as a nonprofit, educational corporation. The title is a combination of the community's worldly name, Shakertown, and its original Shaker designation as Pleasant Hill.

Led by Earl D. Wallace, a well-known Kentucky businessman, members from central Kentucky, Lexington, and Louisville joined the effort. Mr. Wallace was elected chairman of the board of trustees, a position he held until his death in 1990.

James Lowry Cogar, the first curator of Colonial Williamsburg, returned to his native state to become the first president of Shaker Village. Mr. Cogar was responsible for the innovative plan for adaptive use of historic buildings and excellence in restoration standards. He insisted upon the purchase of 2,250 acres of orig-

Aerial photograph of Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill in autumn. Photo courtesy Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky.



Centre Family Dwelling on Pleasant Hill. Photo courtesy Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky.

inal Shaker land to act as a buffer against commercial encroachment. The village now owns 2,800 acres of the Shakers' original 4,500 acres.

In 1964, Mr. Cogar hired James C. Thomas who had worked with the restoration of Locust Grove in Louisville, the last home of General George Rogers Clark. The actual restoration began in 1966. It quickly became apparent that no government agency or trust would provide long-term support and that Pleasant Hill would have to be self-sufficient. Admission income also would not be enough to ensure the project's long-term survival. The board of trustees understood the need to create a unique environment where visitors would be immersed in the Shaker experience. Offering dining, overnight lodging, and craft sales would fulfill this vision and assure success.

Work began to bring Pleasant Hill back to its 19th-century appearance. All utilities were buried, walks were repaired or replaced, and original paint colors were discerned and duplicated. In 1965, U.S. Highway 68, which then ran through the center of the village, was re-routed to bypass the village. A group of carpenters was



trained by Mr. Thomas to reproduce some 1,400 pieces of Shaker furniture. They had also arranged for thousands of yards of material to be hand-woven into carpets and curtains with which to furnish all buildings in Shaker style. Restoration efforts continued in the main village through 1967. In 1968, the main village road was restored to its original appearance. That same year, a few exhibition buildings, lodging accommodations, the dining room, and first craft sales shop opened to the public. This brought to a close the first stage of the restoration.

The second phase of the restoration began in 1968 and included 10 buildings that had been deleted from phase one for lack of funds. From outward appearances at the end of the second phase in 1974, the village had been completely restored, but there were many things left to do.

In 1971, Pleasant Hill was designated as a National Historic Landmark.

Mr. Cogar retired in 1974 and James C. Thomas became the second president of Shaker Village. He brought a wealth of experience to his current position of president and chief executive officer from his years of involvement with every aspect of the restoration and preservation of Pleasant Hill.

In 1986, the West Lot area was acquired. This added a 480-acre tract with three original Shaker buildings. Restoration of the West Lot area was completed in 1992.

In 1990, after the death of Earl Wallace, William T. Young, Lexington businessman and philanthropist, was elected as the second chairman of the Board of Trustees. His first task was to launch a capital campaign to raise funds for the revitalization of Pleasant Hill. Under the direction of President Thomas, the effort of

Costumed interpreter in window of 1820 Meeting House. Photo by Roger Selvidge.



Costumed interpreters passing the 1820 Meeting House at the end of the work day. Photo by Roger Selvidge.



“restoring the restoration” began. By this time, there were buildings in need of new roofs and replacement of aging equipment. Creating access for the physically challenged was particularly difficult. Because the Shakers were well known for their agrarian pursuits, creating a Historic Farm

Program provided new educational opportunities for visitors.

The campaign also funded the construction of two unique architectural projects compatible with the rural environment. The 1820 Meeting House space that had been adapted for use as office space was no longer sufficient and a new administrative office building with a façade resembling a typical Kentucky tobacco barn was built. The new library/collections area was innovatively housed within an existing barn.

It is clear from the renovation and preservation of Pleasant Hill that it is an ongoing process that never actually has an end. Restoring a building is only the beginning. Each building must be maintained and repaired on a regular schedule to ensure the restoration remains at the highest level of quality. Ongoing research is used to verify the adaptive uses put in place. Occasionally, a better or higher use is found. The best example is the East Family Dwelling cellar, which was once used as meeting space. It has been re-adapted to house the *Shaker Life* exhibit area with its changing exhibits, hands-on room, and video viewing room.

Diana B. Ratliff is Director of Marketing and Public Relations at Pleasant Hill.



Printed on
recycled paper



U.S. Department of
the Interior
National Park Service
Cultural Resources (Suite 350NC)
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE \$300

VOLUME 24 • NO. 9
Cultural Resources
Washington, DC

FIRST CLASS MAIL
Postage & Fees Paid
U. S. Department of the Interior
G-83